



TRANSCENDENT MEMORY *by Anthony Harrigan*

The significance of the past—the past of a minute or an hour ago, 100 years ago, or 5,000 years ago—is of consuming interest to me; many writers are concerned with the effects of time on people and institutions. The past provides writers with most of their raw material. Proust had only to taste a sweet, and the world of the past flooded his mind with recollections. I am intrigued with the nature and operation of time. How do we get from here to there? How did we get from there to here?

Movement through time is complex and often bewildering. We are very different at various ages because of the passage of time. We identify blocks of time in our life or in historical existence. We recall in vivid detail scenes from our childhood or young adulthood. We remember crises and struggles, traumas, and placid stretches of life. Something that happened to us at age 10 or 25 strikes us as real as what happens to us today. We go back into time and, remembering, feel as we felt earlier in our existence. We also may be sensitive to the time in which our parents or ancestors lived. We may, in our mind, recreate moments or entire periods of their existence. If we are students of history, we may come to believe that we understand a distant era so well that it is real to us. Standing alongside the columns of the Temple at Sounion, I once felt transported to the days of the ancient Greeks who voyaged over the wine-dark sea.

But what of the actual process of time, the ticking away of hours and years? Do we sense that at all? An anonymous contributor to *The New Yorker* discussed that in an extraordinarily perceptive way some time back. She described a stay in the countryside, while awaiting the birth of her child. "One evening," she wrote, "in a jungly place near the beach I heard a woodpecker rapping a tree: rat-a-tat. That was the present, and gone forever as soon as it was done." She said she was listening to time. She wrote of the various rhythms all around her—and us. There were, she said, old-time sounds—the Angelus ringing in a church across the field, a train whistle, a faraway barking dog. These sounds clashed with another contemporary tempo. There was, she noted, "changiness in a place that was country and is slowly becoming a kind of city." There was the growl of tractors and other earth-moving machinery, of carpenters building new structures. "I listened," she wrote, "for the tempi of my parents', my grandparents', my great

grandparents' lives, each tempo unfolding like a separate gesture within the historical tempo of this place where all of us had lived." She also tried to listen for the tempi of history in a broader sense.

I suspect we would profit from listening to time; listening brings understanding. I am especially interested in what we hear when there aren't any contemporary sounds in the air, as often happens at the village of Sewanee, Tennessee, where I live. What do we hear in a truly quiet place? Do we hear time passing? Is time *real* in a truly quiet place? Sometimes I ask myself, in my small and very quiet community, what happened to the small and quiet world of 100 years ago? Where is the world of Sewanee that existed in 1885? Has it truly vanished, or do we simply not see it? I asked the same question when I visited Carnac, France, in the dead of winter, and saw the miles-long stone avenues erected by an unknown people, 5,000 years ago. I wondered: Could I hear anything in that winter silence? Is the world of our early European ancestors truly lost there, or at Stonehenge or similar sites? Can we hear or discern



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something if we listen very carefully? In other words, can we reach the past through a heightened awareness? Do worlds linger? Certainly, the modern mind is not inclined to believe any such thing. The modern mind lacks historical consciousness or a sense of what lies beyond history. In much of the modern world, the folkchain of memory is broken. People don't live in one place any more, as the popular song of the early 1970's rightly said. There are discontinuities of time and place. With the discontinuities comes loss of what has been called transcendent memory.

I am speaking here of something more than historical consciousness which comes out of living in a traditional community, but which also can emerge from a reading of history, and the understanding gained from books. The links between the present and the past may be more than the historical clues we have discovered in libraries or diggings. These may be mystical, that is, beyond rational explanation and analysis. The anonymous contributor to *The New Yorker* whom I quoted earlier certainly is someone who derived understanding in ways unacceptable to a historian or social scientist. She was hearing, or trying to hear, sounds that weren't heard by others. She was listening for nature's clock in a way that wouldn't occur to most people in our time. She stretched her imagination, commenting that "The score of nature within which we listen to our history is enormous and complex in a way completely beyond the imagination of our ancestors."

We now are able to see nature in terms of our knowledge of evolution, geology, and galaxies. To be sure, even a very short while ago people thought of the world as young—perhaps of 6,000 years duration—and lacked all understanding of the forces in nature—from the atom to outer space. But the anonymous contributor to *The New Yorker* failed to note that modern man has lost an awareness of nature—something more than an awareness of history—that people 5,000 or 6,000 years ago were keenly alive to. The great stone monuments of Western Europe—40,000

or 50,000 of them—are silent witnesses to a lost understanding. They put *our* understanding to a test. We aren't sure how a scanty population, without technology, was able to put the Stonehenges and Carnacs in place. More importantly, we don't understand *why* they did so. What drove them to use their resources in this manner? What theories or conceptions lay behind the arrangements and relationship of the megaliths? There was not a haphazard disposition of monumental stones but a great design, the features of which we can't fathom.

Endless questions arise from the megalithic monuments, such as what were these stone structures for, in the ancient societies which constructed them? These and other queries make us realize that we have no idea of the builders' motivation, or insight into the content of their beliefs. It's humbling for us, modern men and women, to realize that our knowledge of science may have cost us the understanding possessed by our forebears in ancient times. Yet we must use intuition to rediscover it, at least as much as archaeological analysis.

Archaeological analysis is not to be discounted, of course. Modern times have produced the most extraordinary tools for reconstructing the life of hundreds and thousands of years ago. By examining carvings, pollen, remnants of food, the wear and tear on human bones, as well as patterns cut in or painted on rock, we can retell the very ancient past. The future offers an exciting promise that we shall know a great deal more about our past. Undoubtedly, we shall discover what caused human groups long ago either to survive or to perish.

In an electronic world it seems all the more important to attempt to rediscover our mystical bond with the past. To live only in and for the moment, or in anticipation of the future, is to be deprived in life. To emphasize the past should not mean failing to savor the present. A balanced view of life certainly involves what Richard Magruder called an "appreciation of smaller increments" of existence. Those who are ill and thus aware of their mortality often develop a heightened appreciation of the present. They treasure every moment left to them, truly grateful for each additional day.

The person with both a transcendent memory and an appreciation of the present, however, has not exhausted the potential of the human consciousness. For those with a mystical awareness, the religious, there is the present, the past—the world of transcendent memory—and, finally, that which lies beyond history—eternity, where human life is conjoined with the divine plan of existence. Not everyone is capable of developing a sense of eternity. Only the saints may do so to the fullest, though untold multitudes across the globe strain to know what lies beyond history, life, and civilization. My own sense of what lies beyond is very limited, an article of faith imparted to me in my childhood. My personal sense of mystery is much more closely associated with the past of our race, and with the illuminating memory that reaches that past.

In contemplating time and searching for its meaning, we attempt to answer one of the largest questions we can address: What is a human being? We can't get a complete answer to that by studying the behavior of only our contemporaries. We have to review the human record in its

In the forthcoming issue of *Chronicles*:

A Latin America

"The conflict of 1846-1848 was one in which the United States was clearly justified in its actions. It was a conflict in which our armed forces performed brilliantly and in which we exacted the just fruits of our victory. This also was a conflict which the Mexican government deliberately sought, one which it confidently expected to win. This war, most properly, should be recalled as 'the War of Mexican Aggression.'"

—from "The War of Mexican Aggression"
by Odie B. Faulk

fullest. Modern men and women are not the first to seek an answer to this question, to explore their potential, or to search for fulfillment. Men and women have been doing so since the dawn of consciousness. While most of life, as Peter Levi has said, has been the plodding process of grazing cattle or the spinning of cloth, it would be absurd to think of our ancestors' minds as less developed than ours. The questions we ask ourselves today undoubtedly were also posed by them, that is, the fundamental, interior questions—those that don't depend on current information for answers. Indeed, we turn to Plato, Aristotle, and the writers of the Old and New Testaments—thinkers and chroniclers of antiquity—when we want to ponder the ambiguities of our intellectual and moral existence.

As we grow older, our memories become more important to us, and we seek transcendent memories, forced by the knowledge that in a very short time we too will become a memory. I was much struck by an article by Dr. Benjamin Spock, who spoke of aging and physical death as a passage from man to memory. This prompted me to ponder the differences between a living person and the memory of him, and the difference between memory and a dream. For those who have grown up in the historic Catholic tradition, whether Roman or Anglican, Jesus is a historical figure who died on a cross in Jerusalem almost 2,000 years ago as well as a living person. This duality extends to a host of figures from the Christian past. The old Episcopal Book of Common Prayer reminds us that we are surrounded by "the communion of saints." Indeed, in the course of life, one encounters a number of people—many in the most humble circumstances—whose impact is so intense that they are ever in mind. They remain a living presence long after they die physically. In such cases, it is hard to say whether the memory is less powerful than the man. And what, philosophically, is the difference between those physically alive but sleepwalking through their daily existence and those physically dead but alive in the being of others? I am not enough of a philosopher to explain or understand that, but I am aware of its reality.

Then what do we make of dreams? A dream, like a memory, isn't in the here and now. Yet we contend that memories bear the imprint of reality, whereas dreams are unreal. Here the distinction seems clearer: A memory is an accurate or reasonably accurate reconstruction of a real event. A dream, on the other hand, is a disconnected mental construction, drawn from the bits and pieces of reality. Memories shape the present by giving coherence to the stream of events as they occur. Dreams, however, are often a distorting force in life; we wonder why they are part of the activity of the mind. At times, they seem to be dysfunctional, confusing, and disturbing. At other times, what takes place in a dream confirms the dreamer's basic outlook on a situation. Why they sometimes seem dysfunctional, and why they sometimes buttress a person's values is a great mystery. The most mysterious dreams may be those which recur in life and which don't seem to contain any special meaning or symbolism. One that I have had countless times features a bicycle ride I took when I was 11 or 12, past some empty lots on a street in Garden City, Long Island, during the late 1930's. This is a dream based on a memory, for I often rode past those lots near the home

of Mrs. Townsend, an elderly friend of my mother. Nothing happened on these rides, or in or near these lots, and nothing happens in the recurring dream; I simply ride past the lots and look across them. Certainly, there isn't any *motif* in this dream. Yet it has come back again and again over almost 50 years.

What were the memories and dreams of our ancestors 4,000 or 5,000 years ago? What was their mental universe? Was it crowded with myths and fears of ancient folklore, or did our distant forebears organize reality in ways not very dissimilar to our own? These ancient memories and dreams, of course, are an alien world irretrievably lost; but, then, so is the world of a mere 300 years ago when the American colonies were first settled. We have documentation of that period, and we can detect profound differences in how our closer forefathers discerned the world. Their mental universe clearly was unlike our own. What excited their emotions is not exactly what excites ours in the late 20th century. Even upon reading a relatively recent document, such as Mary Boykin Chestnut's *Diary*, written during the American Civil War, we are surprised by the conversations she reported, by the concerns and outlook of those who figure in it. The detection of these shifts in perception through various periods of life produces what may be described as the sadness of history. It is so hard to capture the real feelings of people in other times. Their mentality is largely unmapped territory, though attempts to explore it offer a fascinating challenge.

We must be careful, of course, not to let our imaginations run away with us when envisioning mental universes of the past. Intuition is important, but we have to bear in mind the staggering change in the West since medieval times, let alone the age when Carnac and Stonehenge were constructed. Robert Darnton, a pioneering contemporary historian, has reminded us that the human condition has changed so much even since the early 18th century "that we can hardly imagine the way it appeared to people whose lives were really hasty, brutish, and short." Much of history, then, is opaque; we see through a glass darkly. In the comfortable, healthy civilization of the present-day West it is hard to appreciate that life in the not-so-distant past was largely a struggle against untimely death. Our great-great-grandparents in the early 19th century were having 10 or more children, most of whom never survived infancy. The imprint of death, therefore, was immensely greater in the past than it is in our era. We need to be very aware of this impact as we attempt to chart the mental landscapes of past men.

Nevertheless, our expeditions into the past are among the most exciting on which we can embark, offering enormous potentials for discovery of new insights into life. The more we study the past and attempt to explore it, the more we learn of the gaps in our knowledge. Endless mysteries of the past, both the recent and very distant, are there to be penetrated. Intellectually voyaging to the dim shores of bygone worlds is one of the greatest challenges open to modern man. Using our archaeological tools, historical records, reason and intuition, raising our consciousness through cultivation of transcendent memory, it is possible to enter into lost realms to a considerable degree, with the satisfaction that such knowledge brings.